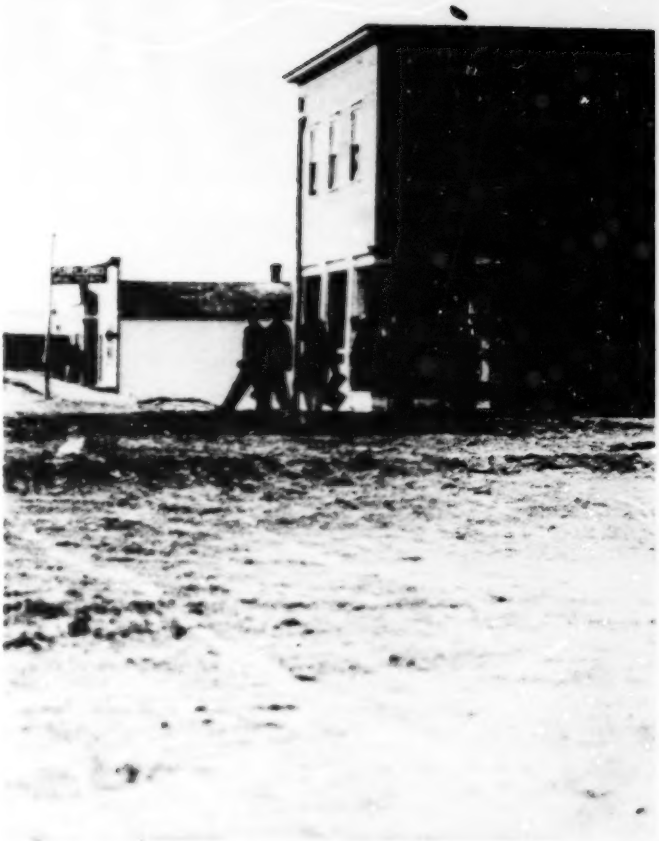
Saskatchewan
Urban Affairs

Municipal Government in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan



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Saskatchewan
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Municipal Government in Saskatchewan —

A look at its past and present

This booklet is a publication of Saskatchewan Urban Affairs, printed in celebration of the 100th Anniversary of municipal government in the province.
October, 1983

Cover Photo: Assiniboia, 1909. Because this booklet marks the 100th Anniversary of municipal government, it seemed appropriate that the cover reflect our past.

Contents

	Page
Introduction	4
Forms of Municipal Government	5
History	
The Road to Local Government	6
The Early Municipal System	7
Government By District	9
The Final Step	11
A System of Adjustment	12
Municipal Government Today	
The Municipal Council	13
Responsibilities and Services	14
The Decision-making Process	14
Municipal Government Financing	16
Taxing for Other Organizations	18
Service to the Public	18
Saskatchewan Urban Affairs	19
Saskatchewan Rural Development	19

Introduction

Saskatchewan is a province full of diversity in its people and its geography. Each community and area has a character of its own, unique to the individuals who live there. It is in a setting such as this that the importance of local government can truly be understood. Local government enables people to shape the kind of area they live in and to have control and initiative in their own affairs. In Saskatchewan, the basic form of local government is called **municipal** government.

Because municipal government is so important to our democratic system, understanding it can be useful in our daily lives. With that idea in mind, this booklet was prepared as a basic description of municipal government in Saskatchewan — how the province's municipal system developed and how it operates today.

Forms of Municipal Government

Rural Municipal Government

Rural Saskatchewan is divided into areas of more or less equal size, known as rural municipalities. In most cases, rural municipalities are rectangular in shape and eighteen miles square. In some cases natural features such as lakes and rivers have been used as boundary lines resulting in smaller or larger municipalities of irregular shape.

Rural municipalities have an elected government consisting of councillors and a reeve. In 1983 Saskatchewan had 299 rural municipalities.

Urban Municipal Government

Where there are pockets of fairly dense population, there are urban communities ranging from very small hamlets, through villages and towns to cities. Villages, towns and cities have their own elected municipal councils and mayors. Hamlets, while urban in nature, are controlled by rural councils. However, in an organized hamlet, there is a board which makes recommendations to the rural council on needed services and spending.

To become a village today a community must have a population of at least 100 and have a solid tax base. A town must have a population of at least 500 and cities must have a population of 5,000.

In 1983 there were 12 cities, 142 towns and more than 350 villages.

Northern Municipal Government

Municipal government in northern Saskatchewan has just recently come of age with the proclamation of The Northern Municipalities Act. The legislation provides autonomous local government to urban communities in northern Saskatchewan and establishes duties and responsibilities almost identical to those exercised by urban municipalities in the south.

History

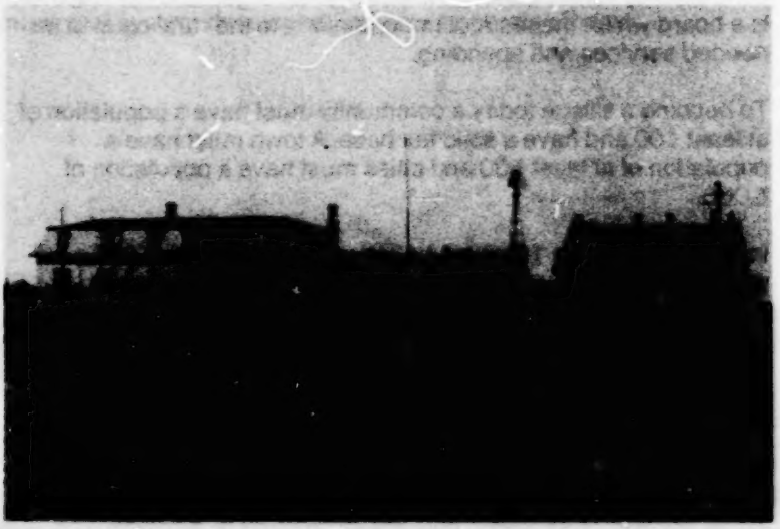
The Road to Local Government

Saskatchewan is part of the large territory which once belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company. What is now Saskatchewan became part of the Dominion of Canada by a Royal Proclamation issued on July 15, 1870. The proclamation brought into Canada, under the name of the Northwest Territories, all of British North America lying between Ontario and British Columbia, from the international boundary to the Artic Ocean.

After Manitoba became a province, separate political existence was provided for the rest of the Territories, which included Saskatchewan in 1876.

The law empowered the Lieutenant-Governor, with the consent of the Territorial Council or Assembly, to pass laws, called ordinances, for the establishment of municipalities and in the field of education.

In 1883 the Territorial Council passed a law, called a Municipal Ordinance, establishing municipal government in the Territories.



Above are the Territorial Government Buildings in Regina, 1886. (Sask. Archives photo)

The Early Municipal System

It was the Municipal Ordinance of 1883 that first provided for the establishment of rural municipalities and towns. The regulations for towns and rural municipalities were generally alike although towns were granted additional powers. Cities were to be established by charter. Four rural municipalities and the towns of Regina and Moose Jaw were established. The four original rural municipalities were Wolseley, Qu'Appelle, South Qu'Appelle and Indian Head although Wolseley and Qu'Appelle were later dissolved, leaving only two.

The Municipal Ordinance provided for the election of a council with provision made for a mayor shortly after in towns and for a reeve in rural municipalities in 1895. British male subjects over the age of 21 who owned property above a certain value (originally $300) could vote. Within the next decade those who were not of British nationality and unmarried or widowed women were also given the right to vote as long as they met the property qualifications. The first elections were carried out with open voting but the closed ballot was brought into effect in 1885.

Municipalities were responsible for almost all local services including construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, drains, sidewalks and sewer and water systems, licensing, appointment of officials, maintenance of public health and welfare, parks, markets and aid to agricultural societies.

Roads and bridges were priorities but activity in other areas was limited by funding. Municipalities also established parks, cemeteries and garbage dumps and provided for the poverty stricken on a case-by-case basis. They often paid the hospital and burial costs for the poor and provided fire protection services through prevention regulations and the supply of firefighting equipment.

The powers of taxation municipalities held were fairly wide including personal property taxation, income tax, and various licensing fees. However, the main source of revenue was the tax on real property or land, and the property tax is still the main tax source for municipalities today.

Although municipalities did use their powers to borrow funds for works and later, operations, the public and councils did not treat borrowing lightly. There was a constant effort to keep spending to a

minimum. Rural municipalities often found their tax bases very limited since a number of tracts of land owned by land companies and non-resident owners were either exempt from taxation and could not be taxed or difficult to collect taxes on while the true settlers were far from wealthy. Many public works were carried out by residents under a system of taxation through labour and there was some limited assistance from the Territorial government.

The municipalities often found their limited resources would not stretch to cover the cost of the administrative trappings provided for under the Municipal Ordinance. Legislation required that each municipality employ a number of appointed officials, which turned out to be more than the young governments needed or could afford. The salaries added to the strain of budgeting and rising public protest led to the reduction in the number of officials required and the creation of the town officer's or secretary-treasurer's position, the forerunner of the key staff administrative position in rural and urban municipalities today.

As settlement increased some method of organizing the small pockets of population that developed was needed. The Unincorporated Township Ordinance was passed for small populated areas. It provided specific rules for meetings of ratepayers to elect an overseer, to determine works and to fix the tax rate. Later the Village Ordinance re-enacted most of the provisions of the earlier legislation with local authority still fairly limited.

Despite some diffficulties, it appears the more populated settlements generally found municipal government fairly suitable to their needs. A number of towns, including Wolseley, Prince Albert, Moosomin, Yorkton, Qu'Appelle and Indian Head, were established before Saskatchewan became a province, but for less settled areas the road to municipal government was a much longer one.

Government By District

While towns and villages expanded and the two remaining rural municipalities struggled on, local government in the rest of the province was running on a different path. Municipal government in most of Saskatchewan was developing through a trial and error system of 'government by district'.

A system of Fire Districts was implemented in 1886 when it was recognized that most of the territories were not prepared for municipal government. Although residents of the area could petition for establishment of a district, their powers in local matters did not extend any further. A fire guardian or overseer was appointed by the Territorial government and had complete discretion in determining works to be done.

From 1887 onward various districts, called Statute Labour Districts, Statute Labour & Fire Districts and Local Improvement Districts were formed. Residents were granted the right to elect an overseer, and in 1895 residents were given direct control over public works. In that year the government established annual ratepayers meetings during which people could vote on projects to be carried out in the year.

Prince Albert, 1905. Prince Albert was the third town that was formally established in Saskatchewan. (Sask. Archives photo)

Works were often performed by a taxation through labour system. Residents had the option of paying their taxes by either working on municipal or district projects or by paying cash. The payment of taxes through labour was an established practice in Europe and, although it may not have been the most efficient system, it was practical for a new land of settlers with very modest finances.

The Local Improvement Ordinance of 1898 changed the Fire and Statute Labour Districts to Local Improvement Districts and brought the areas one step closer to the municipal system of government. Overseers were urged to build roads within the settled area of each district. The territorial government continued to build main roads to market centres, primarily to move grain.

All Local Improvement Districts combined spent a grand total of $60,000 in 1898. The territorial government spent not quite $50,000 on clearing and grading roads; $47,740 to build 94 bridges and about $10,000 for repairs to bridges, culverts and dams.

It soon became apparent that, democracy notwithstanding, the problems facing district administrators were rapidly becoming too complex to be handled under the existing machinery. By the late 1800's the taxation through labour system was creating problems and the Territorial Government began emphasizing the cash basis for payment. In 1899 the local governments were given the right to remove the privilege of payment of taxes through labour, if two-thirds of the residents voted for the change. It was not until after 1903 however, that the payment of taxes through labour was completely abolished along with other major changes being brought in.

New laws were passed in 1904 completely changing the district system of local government. The small Local Improvement Districts were abolished and provision was made for districts with a minimum size of 108 square miles which were made up of three to six units called townships. One councillor was to be elected for each township.

The council elected one of its members as chairman, and had wide powers of administration. It could determine the location and extent of public improvements; appoint officers; control wages within the statutory limit of $2.00 per day for a man or $4.00 per day for a man and team of work animals; fix the tax rate (again, within statutory limits) and allow a discount for prompt payment of taxes.

The Final Step

Before 1905, the year in which Saskatchewan became a province, all municipal affairs were administered by the Territorial Department of Public Works. At its first session, in 1906, the Legislature of the new Province of Saskatchewan authorized the appointment of a Commission to report on a system of municipal government.

The Commission reported to the Legislature in 1908. It recommended immediate establishment of a system of cities, towns, villages and rural municipalities, with a separate Act of the Legislature for each type of unit. The necessary legislation was passed and in 1909 the backbone of the municipal government system that we have in the province today was put into place.

In 1908 the Legislature also passed The Municipal Commissioners Act, creating a department of the government, under a Cabinet Minister, to exercise general supervision over the municipalities. This was one of the first such departments in Canada.

When the Department of Municipal Commissioners was established, the province had four cities, 43 towns, 97 villages, two rural municipalities and 359 districts. On December 13, 1909, the Local Improvement Districts that were in place were disbanded and the province was divided under a general plan into larger nine-township units.

Provision was made for these new Local Improvement Districts to become self-governing rural municipalities when conditions warranted. The plan called for the transition to rural municipalities to be completed by the end of 1912, the change in each case being made following a favourable vote among residents of the area. At the end of 1912, many of the local improvement districts in which no action had been taken were made into rural municipalities without a vote of the residents.

By 1948, Saskatchewan had eight cities, 98 towns, 380 villages, 269 rural municipalities and 13 Local Improvement Districts.

In 1977, all the remaining Local Improvement Districts were disorganized and in their places rural municipalities were established.

Parade celebrating Saskatchewan becoming a province, Regina, 1905. (Sask. Archives photo)

A System of Adjustment

The municipal system of 1909 was a result of several decades of adjustment, change and experimentation. To some extent, the same holds true today. Although the basic system of municipal government created in the early part of this century still functions today, it is, in practice, quite different. Through the years, laws were amended and replaced, responsibilities shifted, and emphasis changed.

At one time municipal governments were almost totally responsible for health and social welfare. Today, most of that responsibility lies with the provincial and federal governments which have a greater ability to cover the massive costs in these two areas. The number of municipalities is constantly changing as hamlets organize into villages, villages form into towns and towns form into cities. The procedures for electing municipal representatives, the system of taxation and municipal financing have all changed since that first legislation.

Like any system of government, municipal government can not and does not remain stagnant and in future years the system will continue to change in a constant adaptation to the changing ways of our society.

Municipal Government Today — How Does It Work?

Municipal government is different from provincial and federal levels of government in that it does not get its power from Canada's Constitution. Municipal government is a product of provincial laws that define what a municipality is and set out the powers of municipal government. In Saskatchewan *The Urban Municipality Act, The Rural Municipality Act* and *The Northern Municipalities Act* are the major laws from which municipal government gets its authority.

The Municipal Council

A council is made up of elected councillors (in towns, villages and rural municipalities) or aldermen (in cities) and an elected mayor (in urban municipalities) or reeve (in rural municipalities). Villages may have two or four councillors; towns have six councillors and cities may have six, eight or ten aldermen. Rural municipalities are divided in six divisions generally, although some rural municipalities do have more divisions, and one councillor is elected from each division.

In urban municipalities councillors and aldermen are usually elected at large, meaning the whole community elects them. In Regina and Saskatoon, however, councillors are elected through a ward system that is similar to the division system used in rural municipalities with one councillor elected by each division. In urban municipalities all councillors, aldermen and mayors serve three-year terms. In rural municipalities councillors and reeves serve two-year terms.

Council meetings are usually held on a regular basis, the frequency of the meetings depending on the size of the community. Generally, a city council meets weekly, a town council meets twice a month and a village or rural municipal council meets monthly. Decisions on behalf of residents of the municipality are made at council meetings through a majority vote of the council.

Responsibilities and Services

A municipal government can only decide on matters related to the municipality it governs. For example, although a municipal council can impose a law against dogs running at large in the municipality it governs, it could not impose that same law on the neighboring municipality. Decision-making areas generally concern developing and maintaining a safe and pleasant environment for residents. This includes police and fire protection; sanitation and public health; some traffic rules; controlling animals; business licensing; building and maintaining streets and roads; providing recreational facilities; constructing and maintaining sewer and water works and ensuring orderly and appropriate business, residential, industrial and agricultural development through planning and zoning rules.

Decisions usually relate to either providing services such as building a new skating rink, providing garbage collection and paving streets or to controlling activities. This would include laws to prevent people from littering or zoning laws that prevent an industry from locating in the middle of a residential neighborhood or that encourage a business to locate in an area where it is needed.

The Decision-Making Process

Matters come to council in a variety of ways. As one entrusted with making decisions on the community's well-being, a councillor might notice things that could be changed or added. For instance, a councillor might notice that the streets are poorly lit at night and that adding lights would make them safer. Another councillor might notice that a bridge is in need of repairs. Both of these matters could be brought up at a council meeting.

Sometimes, especially in larger centres, employees who are appointed by council to maintain the municipality, bring matters to council's attention. For instance, staff people might find traffic problems on a particular street and recommend ways to improve traffic to council.

Usually, however, matters come before council as a result of public opinion. Residents can phone, write or talk to their councillors in person to tell them about something they think should be changed. This can be done informally by simply phoning to discuss the matter with one councillor, or, if a person wishes the entire council to know about the issue, he or she can write a letter to council as a

whole or speak at a council meeting. Council meetings are open to the public so that people can listen to the discussion.

On the surface, making a decision might seem pretty simple, but such is not the case. While one group of people might pressure council to put in a new water supply, another group might be against the idea. As well, there are costs involved with every service and often, there are problems or costs involved with every law that controls activities. Council members must weigh public opinion, public need, public safety and the costs of administering and providing laws and services every time a decision is made.

Because matters can often get quite complex, many councils use committees to study the issues more closely. Committees may be comprised of some or all of the membrs of council and occasionally members of the general public. They are specialized and designed to save time spent on a particular issue at council meetings. A matter can be studied and debated at committee meetings and the committee can then make a recommendation to council. Councils do not need to follow the committee's recommendations. It is up to each individual council member, using his or her own knowledge of the subject, the advice of municipal staff members and the committee recommendation when there is one, to vote as he or she sees best for the community.

Municipal Government Financing

Municipal governments naturally have to pay for the services that are provided by the municipality. The major sources of revenue are a tax on real property that residents own, called the property tax, and transfers of money from senior governments. Councils can also collect money through levies on businesses, licence fees, utility fees such as water and sewer charges and through fines.

The property tax is based on the 'assessed value' of property an individual or company owns. This includes the building and the land. The assessed value is not the same as the purchase value and is arrived at through an evaluation of the property based on a number of factors.

Each year council decides how much it will spend in municipal services and sets up a budget that includes all of its sources of revenue and spending. Once the budget is final, the council sets the tax rate known as the 'mill' rate. The 'mill' rate determines how much in property taxes the municipality will collect and how much tax each property owner will pay.

One mill equals $\frac{1}{1{,}000}$ of the 'assessed value' of the property.

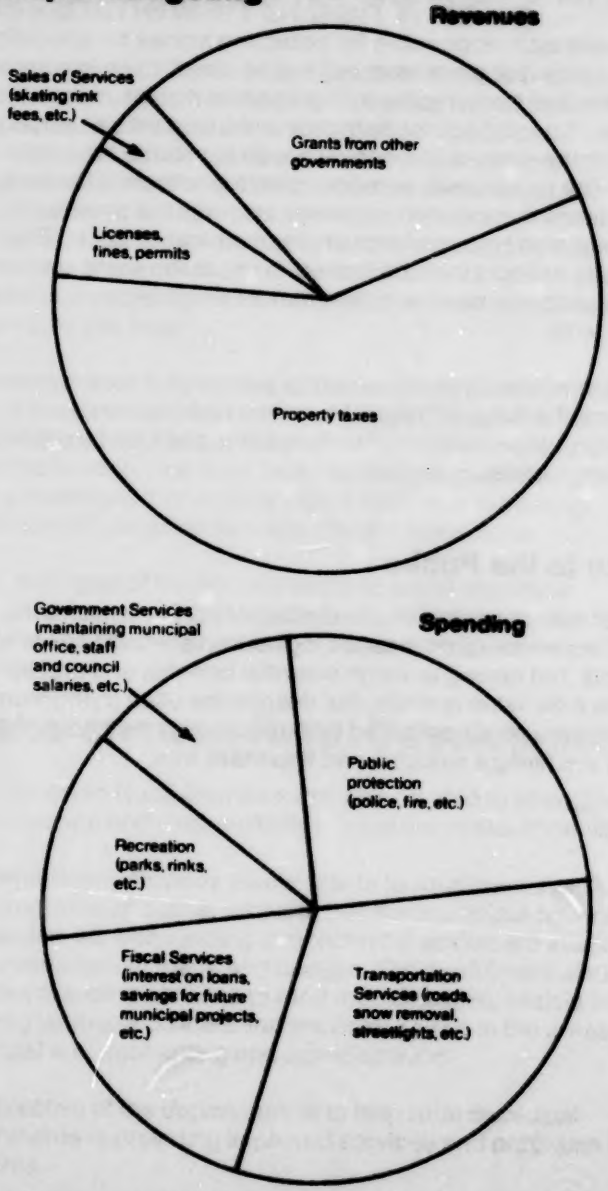
If the mill rate is set at 120 mills and an individual's property has an 'assessed value' of $3,000, the property tax an individual would have to pay is $360

$(120 \times \frac{1}{1{,}000} \times 3{,}000 = \frac{120}{1{,}000} \times 3{,}000 = 360)$.

Municipals councils also receive funding from the provincial and federal governments in a variety of ways which include direct, per resident grants for use as council desires, as well as grants on a per project basis.

A municipal government may also borrow money. Longer term borrowing must be approved by the Local Government Board, a provincially-appointed body, and there are strict procedures to be followed. The council must pass a law and might also bring the matter to a public vote before it borrows the money.

Municipal Budgeting


Revenues
Sales of Services (skating rink fees, etc.)
Grants from other governments
Licenses, fines, permits
Property taxes
Spending
Government Services (maintaining municipal office, staff and council salaries, etc.)
Public protection (police, fire, etc.)
Recreation (parks, rinks, etc.)
Fiscal Services (interest on loans, savings for future municipal projects, etc.)
Tranaportation Services (roads, snow removal, streetlights, etc.)

Municipal operating budgets are not all the same. They vary from municipality to municipality, but the two pie charts give some idea of the revenues and spending picture for a large town or small city.

Taxing for Other Organizations

Councils are also responsible for collecting money for education although municipal governments have no direct voice in education. Another elected body, representing a school district, makes those decisions. The local school district or unit board sets a budget and decides on the amount of money it needs to provide education in the area. The municipality is responsible for collecting the local property taxes that pay part of these costs with the provincial government also paying a large share of education costs. The municipality collects the local school taxes at the same time as the municipal property taxes and then makes monthly payments to the school boards.

The rural municipality is also a taxing authority for rural telephone companies, the Saskatchewan Municipal Hail Insurance Association, union hospitals, health regions and Conservation and Development areas.

Service to the Public

The job of every member of a municipal council is to serve the public. The service often means long hours, listening to a variety of complaints and having to weigh potential benefits and problems each time a decision is made. But despite the often trying moments, most members of councils also feel rewarded in their knowledge that they are filling a valuable and important role.

Saskatchewan Urban Affairs

The department of Urban Affairs provides financial and technical assistance to urban municipalities. Funding is provided in the recognition that the province has a greater ability to collect revenue than municipal governments do, but the municipal level of government is often best able to decide what local facilities are needed to serve its residents. A variety of programs provide funding for capital projects and services that the municipality has decided are needed in the community. Operational funding is provided directly to municipal governments to boost their revenues and to use as they see best.

Technical advice in the areas of planning and development and the daily operation of government is available through the department. The municipal advisers at Urban Affairs receive more than 3,000 phone calls each year from those working in municipal government asking questions that include topics such as interpreting legislation, office procedure and council procedures.

The overall goal of the department is to assist municipal governments in serving their residents and to help in the maintenance of strong and autonomous local government.

Saskatchewan Rural Development

Saskatchewan Rural Development was created to strengthen the independence and responsibility of rural municipal councils.

The department provides yearly grants to rural municipalities for road programs and other projects that the municipal councils feel are needed. As well, funding and technical advice are available for the construction of roads and bridges. The department also provides mapping services to rural municipalities, assists in planning land-use policies and provides advice in the areas of municipal law, accounting and administration.

The objective of the department is to help rural municipal governments in providing improved services and programs for rural residents.

Your Notes